

Reality Wars

Notes on the homicidal state

Jack Bratich

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It is required now to bemoan the fact that the current US President is both a producer and product of Reality TV. Indeed, “reality,” “realty,” and “royalty” are all linked etymologically.

The real-estate tycoon, then, Reality TV boss, now completes the triumvirate by taking on a state executive role by treating it as his own monarchical sovereign seat. Instead of addressing this by seeking to reestablish correspondence-based truth via facts), we would be better off seeing reality as a terrain filled with metamorphosis machines, with subjectivities made and destroyed. We can begin an account of these reality wars by assessing the menagerie of alt-right and neo-fascist street actors emboldened by his victory.

Some have rightly noted that trump’s street “army” emerged from troll-based online cultures, as when some sharp tongued anti-fascists during a protest yelled “Go back to 4chan!” These mutants also have other, older, cultural references. Roman Gladiators, Spartan fighters, medieval knights, and nazi troopers are all re-mixed into the desperately awkward ganglings that gather in the streets. The result: a cosplay assembly for fans of ruined empires.

The genre of the right wing rallies is one familiar to their leader: entertainment wrestling. These fans were weaned on the World Wide Wrestling’s ironic crowd love, founded on the dynamic of costumed reality. Wrestling was the training ground for those leaving reality-based communities.

An early post-truth populist moment was found in those mediated stadiums, locker rooms, and homes. DT himself became a Hall of Famer in this world in 2013 (after the infamous “Hair vs. Hair” match in 2007’s WrestleMania XXIII, where he, in a simulation of archaic sovereign rituals, shaved WWE CEO Vince McMahon bald).

When ElectionMania 2016 became the main event, the 18-30-year-old voters had already spent their entire lives in a post-truth world staged first by the Wrestling Boom of the late 1980s, then enhanced by 21st century Reality TV, and finally augmented by online meme magic strategies.

It’s not that they grew up in an era of fakeness, but rather one in which truth/falsity stayed backstage in favor of other affective investments. Observers have wondered about the authentic conviction of these alt-right actors, noting their ironic postures.

Are all of them ideologically driven adherents? Or, are those that have genuine faith bolstered by a coterie of last-stand costumers, whose only attachment is to the transgressive feels belonging to the competitive anti-PC troll? Are these Lost Boys with mock macho posturings? Do they drink milk publicly as a bold display of white supremacy or as signals that they miss their mommies (while parading their misogyny)?

This carnivalesque moment would be laughable if the stakes weren’t life or death. The wrestling ring might be in the streets, but this time the blood is real, as evidenced in Charlottesville in August 2017.

Trumpist reality re-enactors are infused with a fascist-like will-to-death. When Trump, visiting Poland earlier that summer, asserted “the fundamental question of our time is whether the West has the will to survive,” he was beginning, in inverse form, to announce this self-immolation.

For all the talk of “the West’s” need for preservation by Proud Boys and their Proud Papa, the suicidal impulse among these failed Empire fans dominates. Steve “Walking Dead” Bannon calls for a deconstructive approach

to the state, which means dismantling any biopolitical infrastructure while augmenting the death-making police and military machines. Masculine pissing contests on the world stage threaten to put the NK and the US back into nukes.

Commentators note that 4chan is a community that jokes about its self-destructive drives while encouraging others to kill themselves. Trump fans revel in the glories of ruins so as to dramatize their individual downslides. Since their future is dead, these teens- and twenty-somethings walk as ghosts and simulations not of victorious warriors, but of the defeated—staging a reality as necropolitical carnival.

We need not look at online cultures to see this self/other murderous dynamic. To wit: the increase in “domesticity terrorists”—those men who undertake patriarchal revenge and control killings. These networked “lone wolves” attack individuals (partners, exes, strangers), birth control centers, yoga classes, college campuses and other spaces where women converge. Pick-up artists pick up guns when their “artistry” is rejected.

Mass shooters (almost always men) don’t have the decency to just off themselves—they demand that others join them. Trump’s MAGA death cult is a collective version of these “homi-suicides.”

We can trace this as far back as the Great Depression whose iconic image depicts lone men jumping out of windows, while we know that unemployed men also forced their families to join them in the abyss. Whereas DT and the right crow on about Muslim honor killings, domestic honor killings (where murdering women is seen as a form of revenge against dishonoring the man’s own ego-reputation) and honor suicides-by-cop are routines of everyday misogyny, both monotheistic and secular.

What we’ve witnessed at this socio-cultural level is now becoming a state-machine. Trump is the CEO of the homi-suicide state.

A long passage by Deleuze and Guattari describes it presciently: “When fascism builds itself a totalitarian State, it is not in the sense of a State army taking power, but of a war machine taking over the State. A bizarre remark by Virilio puts us on the trail: in fascism, the State is far less totalitarian than it is suicidal. There is in fascism a realized nihilism. Unlike the totalitarian State, which does its utmost to seal all possible lines of flight, fascism is constructed on an intense line of flight, which it transforms into a line of pure destruction and abolition. It is curious that from the very beginning the Nazis announced to Germany what they were bringing: at once wedding bells and death, including their own death, and the death of the Germans.”

With DT, this version of the fascist war machine is populated not by the sleek uniformity of Nazi regalia, but the comic bricolage of the league of historical reality wrestlers. Theirs is a nihilism dressed up as dead regimes, founded on a stony ambition: a final abolition without end, forming a political body indifferent to its own survival (planetary, especially). Frogs like Pepe live in swamps, too.

Some have called this “populism,” but this backlashing minority are the guardians of a patriarchy and white supremacy in decline. Despite the laughable attempts at neo-royalism (Exhibit A: the manospheric “Return of Kings”) they are not preservers of a powerful noble culture. They are both weak and dangerous, passionate defenders of servitude to ruins. Their final violent gasps are more a destruction of all during a collapse (but especially women and people of color).

In this Upside Down world, characterized by self-immolating death networks and techno-subjective ruination, at best, we are confronted with a necro-populism.

Our conventional political terminology needs to capture this process better. Some have called the rise of Trumpism an insurgent force in US politics. Given its trajectory and speed, it is more like a “downsurgency” in which decline accelerates rapidly.

This downward vortex is cheered by some in their costumes and trolling indifference, while others operate on the more violent end of the necro-spectrum, creating a stochastic mass of killers (by gun, car, and other weapons of networked destruction). Not an uprising, but an accelerated and violent downsinking.

These reality wars are already underway, and the responses are crucial. No platform is a method of refusing the downsurgency public space, it forms a popular security against their vortex. Antifascist insurgencies also invent forms-of-life—imagining and implementing ways of being that counter the necrotic fantasies.

Community defense, collective security, communal forms-of-life: all that is life-affirming wages a different kind of reality war against the death-machines that seek total negation as their final act of sovereign shaping. Creating different kinds of abolition machines means thwarting their authoritarian versions of reality molding.

Reality wars are not fought on the terrain of knowledge and facts, where we act as spectator-participants to reaffirm authoritative venues for truth-making. We return to reality as subjective agents—creating worlds, shaping relations, making forms-of-life. In this reality, we revive a destituent and compositional power that anarchism knows so well.

Jack Z. Bratich is a zine librarian at ABC No Rio in New York City, and an associate professor in the journalism and media studies department at Rutgers University. His research applies autonomist social theory to such topics as reality television, social movement media, and the cultural politics of secrecy. His latest writing appears in *The Culture Jamming Reader* (NYU Press, 2017).

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